

Multiple voices

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Multiple Voices: New York City Poetry

Rona Cran

New York is a city of poets.¹ Rising out of the harbour, Emma Lazarus's sonnet 'The New Colossus' graces the feet of the Statue of Liberty, offering 'world-wide welcome'. Across the water on Manhattan, cast in bronze on elegant railings overlooking the Hudson, are the words of Walt Whitman, hailing 'Proud and passionate' New York as the 'City of the world! (for all races are here; / All the lands of the earth make contributions here)'. Next to Whitman's words are lines from New York School poet Frank O'Hara's prose poem 'Meditations in an Emergency', celebrating the city's natural sensibilities and countercultural joie de vivre: 'One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes'. From Whitman to Claudia Rankine, O'Hara to Maggie Nelson, Langston Hughes to Eileen Myles, Elizabeth Bishop to Vijay Seshadri, poets have infused New York's streets, statues, street corners, parks, squares, buildings, districts, institutions, public transportation systems, bridges, waterways, and even phone booths with their joy, their politics, and their personal lives. As the city's poets negotiate its variousness, in both their writing and their lives, New York takes on alternate guises, manifesting itself in poetry as a subject, a setting, a muse, a witness, and a medium through which emotions, memories, and perspectives are refracted. In a poem called 'New York' (1921), Marianne Moore reflects that the appeal of the city lies not

¹ Notwithstanding the nineteenth-century poet Bloodgood Haviland-Cutter's valiant efforts to put Queens on the literary map with such poems as 'On Observing a Beached Whale at Little Bayside' and 'On Tobacco Smoking in Queens County Court House', or Allen Ginsberg's invocation of 'holy Bronx' in 'Howl', or poems about the Staten Island Ferry (such as Edna St. Vincent Millay's 'Recuerdo' or Audre Lorde's 'A Trip on the Staten Island Ferry'), 'New York', where poets are concerned, tends to be shorthand for 'Manhattan', and sometimes for 'Brooklyn'.

in its 'atmosphere of ingenuity' or in its 'plunder', but in its 'accessibility to experience'.²

The 'experience' of experiencing New York (to slightly reframe the words of one of the city's premier poets, John Ashbery) is the focus of the work of many New York poets, whether they are responding to seismic events in the city's history or reflecting in various ways on quieter (though no less significant) aspects of everyday life within the city limits.³

For many poets, the experience of New York takes the form of both sanctuary and sublimity in commonplace urban scenes. In poems like 'Mannahatta', 'A Broadway Pageant', and 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry', Whitman serenades 'million-footed Manhattan', feverishly celebrating the daily 'glories strung like beads on [his] smallest sights and hearings, on the walk in the street and the / passage over the river'.⁴ O'Hara, for whom New York was a refuge from the oppressive ideals of Cold War America, traversed the city on his lunchbreaks or in the evenings after work, queering its spaces in 'contradictory movements that counterbalance and combine themselves outside the reach of panoptic power'.⁵ He takes 'great pleasure' in 'neon in daylight' and in urban labourers' 'dirty glistening torsos', in 'A Step Away From Them', exuberantly celebrates dancing ('my soul delight') at a gay bar, in 'At the Old Place', and imagines becoming a construction worker and wearing a 'silver hat' in 'Personal Poem'.⁶ Ted Berrigan, meanwhile, who devoured New York in all its richness and squalor when he arrived there in 1961, offers a simultaneously simple and expansive list of all the 'Things to Do in New York (City)', including

light cigarette

² Marianne Moore, 'New York', *Observations* (New York: Dial Press, 1924), p. 65.

³ A. Poulin Jr., 'The Experience of Experience: A Conversation with John Ashbery', *Michigan Quarterly Review* 20. 3 (Summer 1981), pp. 242-55.

⁴ Walt Whitman, 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' and 'A Broadway Pageant', in *Leaves of Grass: the Complete Deathbed Edition* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012), p. 108 and p. 166.

⁵ Michel De Certeau, 'Walking in the City', in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 95.

⁶ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 257; p. 223; p. 335.

Dress in basic black

[...]

play cribbage on the Williamsburg Bridge

[...]

celebrate your own

& everyone else's birth.⁷

For Bernadette Mayer, the bustling ordinariness of the city holds potentially nightmarish change at bay: in 'Presentation of Fruit Stands in January', written on Ronald Reagan's inauguration day in 1981 ('this inauguration day of the most hateful ideals'), Mayer depicts extensively and in panicked detail a range of New York fruit markets 'because the sight of them gives pleasure' and because although

It may sound opulent to mention so much stuff,

But actually all this this and that – don't be fooled –

is as it should be and this I pray is as it would be.⁸

For poets like Amiri Baraka and Eileen Myles, New York is resplendent in essential possibilities. 'Can you stand such beauty?'⁹, Baraka writes of Harlem in the mid-1960s, in 'Return of the Native'; according to Myles, in 'Welsh Poetry' (1981), 'In this, New York City, all of us are heroes!'¹⁰

For every poem celebrating the city's sublimity and possibility, there is another which reveals New York to be stranger, more surreal, more threatening. Allen Ginsberg, who wears his Whitmanian influences on his sleeve, presents a darker but similarly frenzied vision of

⁷ Ted Berrigan, *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan*, ed. Alice Notley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 163.

⁸ Bernadette Mayer and Bill Berkson, *What's Your Idea of a Good Time?* (Berkeley: Tuumba Press, 2006), pp. 78-9.

⁹ Amiri Baraka, *SOS: Poems 1961-2013* (New York: Grove Press, 2014), p. 147.

¹⁰ Eileen Myles, *I Must Be Living Twice* (London: Tuskar Rock Press, 2016), p. 43.

New York in 'Howl', in which (traversing a bleaker city than O'Hara's) his 'angelheaded hipsters' in 'the roaring winter dusks of Brooklyn [...] chained themselves to subways for the endless / ride from Battery to holy Bronx', talking

continuously seventy hours from park to
pad to Bellevue to museum to the Brooklyn Bridge,
a lost battalion of platonic conversationalists jumping
down the stoops off fire escapes off windowsills
off Empire State out of the moon.¹¹

Derek Walcott, writing about Greenwich Village over fifty years later, evokes a disorienting artificiality about the city in which he has lost his typewriter and with it his words:

'Everybody in New York is in a sitcom', he writes, in 'In The Village', suggesting that preordained plotlines, and the readiness of the city's residents to follow them, may have something to do with both his writer's block and his impression, upon leaving the subway, that 'there's nothing subtle or vague / in this horrifying vacuum that is New York'.¹² In Elizabeth Bishop's 'Varick Street' (less than a mile away from Walcott's Greenwich Village) New York is a suffocating nocturnal city of monstrous factories and 'mechanical moons' that 'wax and wane / at somebody's instigation', offering the 'pale dirty light' of 'some captured iceberg / being prevented from melting'.¹³ In her 'Love Lies Sleeping', Bishop, like Walcott, reads New York for its artificiality, envisioning it as a 'little chemical "garden" in a jar', that 'has slowly grown / in skies of water-glass // from fused beads of iron and copper crystals'.¹⁴

For other poets, the city's threats are less abstract, more real: for them, New York holds unfulfilled promises, perpetually deferred dreams, poignant reminders of former lives, or an

¹¹ Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1956), pp. 9-11.

¹² Derek Walcott, in *White Egrets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 2011, p. 45.

¹³ Elizabeth Bishop, *Poems, Prose, and Letters* (New York: The Library of America, 2008), p. 57.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

ever-present threat of dissolution or death. Particularly for poets of colour and poets attuned to, or victims of, economic injustice, New York tends to spark poems about homesickness, alienation, impermanence, and violence. As the city's public inscriptions of Lazarus and Whitman's poetry make clear, New York is a city with a diverse population and a long history of national and international migration (in 'Mannahatta', Whitman exalts the 'Immigrants arriving, fifteen or twenty thousand in a week'¹⁵). New York's poets, therefore, like much of the city's population, are often immigrants or exiles, their experiences in the city circumscribed by a state of precarity. While the sight of fruit markets offers Mayer a kind of political protection, for Jamaican writer Claude McKay, in 'The Tropics in New York', fruit is a distressing reminder of the home he left behind when he moved to the United States in 1912. The sight of a diverse and colourful array of tropical fruit imported to New York from the Caribbean sparks 'a wave of longing' and, 'hungry for the old, familiar ways', the speaker turns aside and weeps for his now-distant homeland.¹⁶ Langston Hughes, in *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), envisions the arrival in New York of immigrants like McKay, who reach the city filled with hope, only to experience racism and economic injustice. He describes

planes from Puerto Rico,
and holds of boats, chico
up from Cuba Haiti Jamaica
in buses marked New York
from Georgia Florida Louisiana.¹⁷

¹⁵ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, p. 320.

¹⁶ Claude McKay, *Harlem Shadows* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922), p. 8.

¹⁷ Langston Hughes, 'Good Morning', *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, in Hughes, *Selected Poems* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1999), p. 269.

The boats and buses are full of people who come ‘dreaming / out of Penn Station’ only to find their dreams deferred: ‘the trains are late. / The gates open – / Yet there’re bars / at each gate’. In ‘A Poet of Compassion’, Eileen Myles ironically conceptualizes the vulnerable citizens of New York as ‘guest[s] of the City’, who

live in back
wards of Manhattan
State, shelters,
shitholes, sidewalks.
Behold the guests.¹⁸

Of course, shitholes and sidewalks accommodate (or fail to accommodate) local New Yorkers too: poet and playwright Arthur T. Wilson wasn’t a ‘guest of the City’; neither was Audre Lorde; neither was Eric Garner, the Staten Islander killed by the New York Police Department in 2014 and memorialised in Ross Gay’s ‘A Small Needful Fact’ (2015). Wilson, in the harrowing poem ‘One Rawdog Night When Too Much of My Queer Was Showing’, depicts ‘a nightmare life / Of desperation / And come-often tears’ in a city characterised by ‘devastating neglect’.¹⁹ Trapped in an endless cycle of poverty and evictions, the speaker is described leaning

Up against yet another life gone
AND rancid ghetto hole:
A nasty tenement building
Where junkies leave their needles
And ceaseless homicide rings

¹⁸ Eileen Myles, *Not Me* (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 1991), pp. 34-5.

¹⁹ Arthur T. Wilson, ‘One Rawdog Night When Too Much of My Queer Was Showing’, in *The Road Before Us: 100 Black Gay Poets*, ed. Assoto Saint (New York: Galiens Press, 1991), pp. 144-53.

On the window ledge.

Brutalised by the police on the night in question, before exacting a terrible revenge, the speaker's early plea echoes devastatingly across the poem:

I just want to LIVE

And be introduced to kindness.

ANYBODY? Please, listen to me.

Less dramatically, though to comparable effect, Lorde's 'Moving Out or The End of Cooperative Living', from the collection *From A Land Where Other People Live* (1973), explores related urban horrors. The poem is punctuated by the grateful refrain 'I am so glad I am moving'; the 'grim house' she is leaving is a 'prison for black and white faces / assaulting each other with [their] joint oppression', emblematic of 'the broken record of dreams / of ordinary people / who wanted what they could not get'.²⁰ Ross Gay's 'A Small Needful Fact', finally, is an elegy for one such ordinary New Yorker, Eric Garner, who no doubt also just wanted to live 'and be introduced to kindness', but who died in a chokehold on a New York City street, repeatedly gasping the words 'I can't breathe'. Gay's fifteen-line poem implicitly contrasts Garner's violent, public death with his lesser-known life as a New York Parks and Recreation employee; Gay shyly imagines Garner's 'very large hands' putting

gently into the earth

some plants which, most likely

some of them, in all likelihood, continue to grow.²¹

Gay's under-stated evocation of the gentle, lived qualities of Garner's contribution to New York's life-sustaining 'greenery',²² which makes 'it easier / for us to breathe', is haunted by

²⁰ Audre Lorde, *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (New York: Norton, 2000), pp. 74-6.

²¹ Ross Gay, 'A Small Needful Fact', 2015, www.splitthisrock.org/poetry-database/poem/a-small-needful-fact.

his death, as it is by the lives and deaths of thousands of other ‘ordinary people / who wanted what they could not get’, as well as those ‘guests of the City’ whose dreams were forever deferred.

‘Poetry is not a luxury’: New York’s Poetics of Witness

As the poems discussed above suggest, New York City enables, or provokes, a wide range of poetry, from the documentary to the surreal, the elated to the abject. But it also inspires a certain *kind* of poetry – namely, a poetics of witness, underpinned by dissent of various forms, from anti-establishment aesthetic impulses and a desire to do things differently to political protest and campaigns for social justice. New York is, of course, a historical site of (and sometimes cause for) political activism; for well over a century it has been a centre of direct and indirect action addressing universal suffrage, working conditions, the Vietnam War, gay rights, gentrification, the AIDS crisis, and economic inequality.²³ It is also a key part of the East Coast’s corridors of intellectual power, and as such is a space in which dominant aesthetic currents are both consolidated and contested, by individual poets and through the publication of a number of paradigm-shifting anthologies, each challenging the poetic status quo, including Donald Allen’s *The New American Poetry 1945–1960* (1960), Assoto Saint’s *The Road Before Us: 100 Gay Black Poets* (1991), and Florence Howe and Ellen Bass’s *No More Masks! An Anthology of Poems by Women* (1973). The rest of this chapter is devoted to providing a lens through which to read New York’s poetics of resistance and witness, focussing on the work of two politically-engaged New York poets, Audre Lorde and Eileen Myles. Both wrote from the position of exclusion from what Lorde defined as the

²² O’Hara, *Meditations in an Emergency* (New York: Grove Press, 1957), p. 38.

²³ Examples include the aftermath of the deadly Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911; huge anti-Vietnam War protests in 1967; author-activist Jane Jacob’s efforts to prevent city planner Robert Moses from building the Lower Manhattan Expressway through Greenwich Village in 1968; the Stonewall Riots in 1969; the Women’s Strike for Equality in 1970; the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), an international direct action advocacy group, founded in 1987; and the global protest movement Occupy Wall Street which began in New York in 2011.

‘mythical norm [...] usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure’.²⁴ The poetry of each approaches a spectrum of political concerns, and reveals a shared (and not uncommon) desire to use New York City in their work to address marginalisation and to articulate anger, anguish, or anti-establishment perspectives. As we have already seen, both Lorde and Myles address issues of housing, homelessness, and economic injustice in their work; both also deploy specific and often recognisable geographical information in their poems, reflecting an aesthetic impulse to reclaim space for various marginalised demographics within New York.²⁵ Viewed together, their poetry offers an important insight into the shifting dynamics of care and indifference that exist between poets and the city.

‘Poetry is not a luxury’, wrote Audre Lorde: ‘it is the skeleton architecture of our lives’, offering ‘the strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak, and to dare’.²⁶ Poetry, in other words, can function as a site of protest with public potential, enabling the articulation of shared pain, neglect, or wrongdoing, and offering avenues of hope, action, and even change. Lorde wrote extensively (her *Collected Poems* is almost 500 pages long, and she was also a prose writer) about the intersections of her experiences as a black feminist lesbian poet, and the resistance she faced as she worked to occupy space – personally and politically – in the world. She was also an activist, and much of her work deals with racial injustice and gender and economic inequalities. Sara Ahmed observes that Lorde’s writing is ‘personal testimony as well as political speech’ and that she ‘made life itself a political art, an art which you must craft from the resources that you have available’.²⁷ One of her most crucial resources was

²⁴ Audre Lorde, ‘Age, Race, Class, and Sex’, in Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017), pp. 94-106, p. 96.

²⁵ Other poets who deploy specific geographical locations in their work include Frank O’Hara, Amiri Baraka, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Anne Waldman, Adrienne Rich, Ron Padgett, Alice Notley, John Ashbery, Edwin Denby, Charles Reznikoff, Kenneth Koch, Lucy Lippard, Grace Paley, and David Trinidad.

²⁶ Audre Lorde, ‘Poetry Is Not a Luxury’, in Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), pp.36-39.

²⁷ Sara Ahmed, Introduction to *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, pp. vi-viii.

New York, the city in which she was born, and where she lived for significant periods of time. Her 1974 collection *New York Head Shop and Museum* is both a portrait of the city as it slid into dereliction in the 1970s and a metaphorical act of taking to the streets in order to reclaim space and assert the existence of the marginalised, anticipating Arthur T. Wilson's declaration in 'One Rawdog Night': 'I WALK WITH PRIDE, / AND I DECLARE MY SPACE!'²⁸

A glance at the contents list indicates the extent of New York's critical role in the collection – titles include 'New York City 1970', 'To Desi As Joe As Smoky The Lover Of 115th Street', 'A Sewerplant Grows in Harlem', 'A Birthday Memorial To Seventh Street', 'Grand Central Shuttle', 'A Trip On The Staten Island Ferry', and 'Memorial III From A Phone Booth On Broadway'. The poems themselves are filled with references to a wide range of identifiable places all over New York, including the subway, the Staten Island Ferry, East Side Drive, Wall Street, 14th Street, Riverside Drive, Brighton Beach Brooklyn, and 125th Street and Lenox.²⁹ The city that emerges from *New York Head Shop* is overwhelmingly deficient but richly lived, containing occurrences of horror, heartbreak, and sometimes happiness. The opening poem includes lines that lament 'There is nothing beautiful left in the streets of this city'; 'there is nothing worth salvage left in this city'; 'I am bound like an old

²⁸ Wilson, in Saint, *The Road Before Us*, p. 146. As noted above, many New York poets have used the city streets in their work, but on three dates in the spring of 1969, a group of poets and artists literally took to the streets to perform a collaborative, reclamatory project called *Street Works I-III*, designed to repossess the city for artists and poets, and any non-commercial admirers of their work. Figures including John Giorno, Vito Acconci, Hannah Weiner, Lewis Warsh, Lil Picard, Rosemarie Castoro, Rosemary Mayer, John Perreault, Bobbi Gormley, Lucy Lippard, and Anne Waldman engaged in and documented a series of activities on the city streets over a period of three separate days and nights. These included moving line by line through a poem while walking through the city street by street (and keeping a note of all movements, encounters etc.); making telephone calls from one booth to another, letting each phone ring three times and mapping the route for future re-tracing; walking around a designated area (down 14th Street, down 6th Street, up 13th Street, up 5th Street), wearing a sandwich-board with an original poem handwritten on it; and handing out hundreds of pink slips of paper with the words 'Happy Weekend folks!' written on them.

²⁹ Jazz poet Gil Scott-Heron's debut album, released in 1970 and featuring the song-poem 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised', was titled *A New Black Poet – Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*. It is likely that Lorde's poem 'Cables to Rage, or I've Been Talking on This Street Corner a Hell of a Long Time' is referring to it.

lover – a true believer – / to this city’s death by accretion’.³⁰ ‘Why hasn’t there been a New York City Subway Riot / some bloody rush-hour revolution’, Lorde asks in ‘One Year To Life On The Grand Central Shuttle’; perhaps because, she suggests, ‘hope is counter-revolutionary’.³¹ ‘A Birthday Memorial To Seventh Street’ recalls the housing nightmares of her earlier poem, ‘Moving Out or The End of Cooperative Living’, as it imagines ‘masked men in white coats’ taking ‘the names of anyone / who has not paid the rent in three months’.³² In ‘The Bees’, little boys kick a bees’ nest to smithereens ‘in the street outside a school’, while ‘four little girls look on in fascination [...] trying to understand their own destruction’.³³ In ‘To The Girl Who Lives In A Tree’, Lorde loses a lover, and describes weeping ‘for a year / down 14th Street across the Taconic Parkway / through the shingled birdcotes along Riverside Drive’.³⁴ In ‘To My Daughter The Junkie On A Train’, ‘a long-legged girl with a horse in her brain’ provokes collective guilt ‘up and down across the aisle’ among women who ‘avert their eyes’.³⁵ The city is not necessarily beyond redemption, however: ‘New York City 1970’ darkly suggests the possibility of sacrifice and ‘renewal by fire’, offering an image of the city ‘reborn perhaps / blackened again but this time with a sense of purpose’.³⁶ And in ‘A Trip On The Staten Island Ferry’ Lorde urges her son Jonno:

Cherish this city
left you by default
include it in your daydreams
there are still

³⁰ Lorde, *Collected Poems*, p. 101.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 110.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 101. This is likely to be a reference to New York’s arson epidemic of the 1970s, during which tens of thousands of premeditated blazes ravaged the city, as landlords realised they could make more money from insurance than from renting properties to low-waged tenants. As Joe Conason and Jack Newfield wrote in *Village Voice* in 1980: ‘Arson is the cremation ritual of a diseased housing system. [...] In housing, the final stage of capitalism is arson’.

secrets

in the streets

even I have not discovered.³⁷

The careful and deliberate naming of these places and the varied events that take place within them is an act of possession, which allows Lorde to tangibly demarcate the reality of her presence in New York City, reconfiguring the 'mythical norm' by declaring the powerful and multi-dimensional existence of a black, lesbian, feminist, activist New York poet, the daughter of Grenadian immigrants and the mother of two children of her own. She enacts her friend the poet Adrienne Rich's argument that for women writing can and should be a process of 're-vision': 'if the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment [...] writing is re-naming'.³⁸ Lorde queers the city, claiming its streets for herself by moving them 'outside the reach of panoptic power'.³⁹ This is also an act of connection that reaches beyond the page, converting 'scene into seen'⁴⁰ as she prompts anyone familiar with New York to think 'I know that place!' or 'I've been there!'. This is a political act – a form of political labour that opens up the city, and the diversity of experiences evoked within it, to others who exist, in whatever way, outside of the 'mythical norm'. Despite living in what Rita Dove calls 'the crosshairs of gender and racial oppression', Lorde's depictions of life in

³⁷ Lorde, *Collected Poems*, p. 119.

³⁸ Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', in *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York: Norton, 1993), pp. 166-177, p. 174. Rich also uses New York City in her poetry, particularly in work that explores her political awakening. In 'The Phenomenology of Anger' (*Diving Into The Wreck* (New York: Norton, 2013), p. 27), she invokes subway riders planning rebellion as they hurtle toward Brooklyn; in 'Burning Oneself In' (*Ibid.*, p. 46.), 'a bookstore on the East Side' contains 'a veteran's testimony' about atrocities carried out in Vietnam, leading to a meditation on quiet suffering; in 'The Stranger' (*Ibid.*, p. 19), she looks 'straight down the heart / of the street to the river' as if to steel herself before asserting her existence as 'the androgyne [...] the living mind you fail to describe / in your dead language'. The opening poem of 'Twenty-One Love Poems' (*Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, p. 77), a sequence of lesbian love poems that formed the cornerstone of her campaign against lesbian erasure, conjures up familiar New York City images – screens that 'flicker with pornography', 'rainsoaked garbage' – before asserting the reality and vibrancy of 'lives inseparable from those rancid dreams'. 'No one has imagined us', Rich writes, evoking a relationship 'still exuberantly budding / [...] animal passion rooted in the city'.

³⁹ De Certeau, 'Walking in the City', p. 95.

⁴⁰ Stephen Heath, 'Narrative Space', *Screen* 17. 3 (1976), pp. 68–112, p. 83.

New York refuse to ‘privilege one identity over the other’.⁴¹ As Reni Eddo-Lodge observes, ‘we find comfort in her words because we see that the struggles we thought we were alone in she struggled with too’.⁴² In taking to the streets, within her poetry as well as in real life, Lorde offers not just a model of resistance and a poetics of witness, but a means of connection: because she is there, others (women, people of colour, queer people, mothers, immigrants) can be too.

Eileen Myles’s raw and humane *Not Me* (1991) presents a similarly rich and multi-faceted vision of New York, examining the lure of the city for the politically and socially marginalised, the formative role it has played in countless lives, and its seeming indifference toward many of its citizens in spite of this. Like Lorde, Myles punctuates their poetry with urban dramas and specific references to identifiable New York streets, squares, and local institutions (‘Once when I passed East Fourth Street off First Avenue’; ‘my heart / breaking down 23rd / St.’; ‘Through burgeoning / Union Square / where I left / my bike’; ‘Love Saves / the Day where / Madonna / buys her / clothes’), geographically locating the events that take place in *Not Me* in order to demonstrate familiarity with the city in a double-edged effort to stake out territory and plead for inclusion there.⁴³ Myles is a working-class non-binary lesbian from Boston for whom New York City, where they relocated in 1974, represented the possibility of a glorious exile (‘In this, New York City, all of us are heroes!’), which was only partially realised.

Not Me is imbued with suggestions of disbelief at Myles’s fortuitousness at surviving, even thriving, in New York – a ‘shitty little place’ that ‘was sold in 1978’ (the year Mayor Ed

⁴¹ Rita Dove, Introduction to *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, ed. Dove (New York: Penguin, 2013), p. xlviii.

⁴² Reni Eddo-Lodge, Preface to *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, p. i.

⁴³ Myles, ‘Holes’, ‘The Sadness of Leaving’, ‘Basic August, and ‘A Poet of Compassion’, *Not Me*, p. 32, p. 43, p. 73., p. 34. Love Saves The Day was bric-a-brac and vintage shop at the corner of 2nd Avenue and 7th Street. In the 1985 film *Desperately Seeking Susan*, Madonna’s character visits the shop and trades her jacket for a pair of studded kitten-heeled ankle boots.

Koch – who Myles describes as ‘a murderer’ – took office).⁴⁴ The relationship that emerges between the poet and New York is one that verges on the toxic – acutely aware of their good fortune at living in a house ‘in the middle of New York City’⁴⁵ in spite of the city’s immanent threat of homelessness, they personify the streets as alternately threatening, alluring, and in need of care. In ‘Vista’, Myles describes feeling ‘so criticized by the streets’,⁴⁶ when old clothes they’ve laid out on trash cans take days to vanish. In ‘The Sadness of Leaving’, they are ‘terrified by the / bright blues of / the subway’.⁴⁷ In ‘A Poem’, New York is ‘a monster’, which slowly unwraps ‘difference like streamers or leaves’, leaving the poet ‘naked and forlorn’.⁴⁸ But elsewhere, and often in the same poems, Myles evokes streets that are ‘a lover / to me’ (‘If / anything lives / I have seen / it in the street’);⁴⁹ streets that suffer the pain of gentrification, with which Myles sharply empathises (‘For once / I experienced / the pain of / the pavement / [...] like / the street’s / been hurt / by NYU & / has a plate / or a cast’);⁵⁰ streets whose beauty prevents suicide (‘I won’t / kill myself today. It’s / too beautiful’);⁵¹ and streets ‘where / gayness is going / strong’, where ‘we still kiss at corners’.⁵² For all the pain and struggle and fear, New York for Myles offers both rootedness and adventure. While ‘everyone’s / going away someplace / or just came back’,⁵³ Myles maintains an unwavering presence, ‘driven / by the rainbows / of trash in puddles’.⁵⁴

‘An American Poem’, the first poem in the collection, encapsulates the powerful and dangerous contradictions Myles witnessed and experienced in New York. In the poem, Myles

⁴⁴ Myles, ‘A Poem’, in *Not Me*, pp. 107-9.

⁴⁵ Ibid., ‘Everything’s House’, pp. 21-31.

⁴⁶ Ibid., ‘Vista’, pp. 104-6.

⁴⁷ Ibid., ‘The Sadness of Leaving’, pp. 43-5.

⁴⁸ Ibid., ‘A Poem’, pp. 107-9.

⁴⁹ Ibid., ‘Hot Night’, pp. 51-7.

⁵⁰ Ibid., ‘Everything’s House’, pp. 21-31. From about 1980 onwards, New York University increasingly bought up and renovated buildings in the Lower East Side, causing the area to resemble ‘a constant frat party’ (Edmund Berrigan, in conversation with the author).

⁵¹ Ibid., ‘The Sadness of Leaving’, pp. 43-5.

⁵² Ibid., ‘Basic August’, pp. 73-95.

⁵³ Ibid., ‘Twentieth Century Dinosaur’, pp. 58-62.

⁵⁴ Ibid., ‘Hot Night’, pp. 51-7.

‘cannily performs being “somebody” and “nobody” at the same time’,⁵⁵ to borrow from Maggie Nelson, offering up a fictive autobiography in which they posit themselves as a member of the Kennedy family hiding from their role in America’s grand historical narrative by pretending to be a down-and-out dyke and poet in New York City.⁵⁶ But ‘there is no escaping / history’: the ruse is uncovered and Myles is outed as a Kennedy, duly taking up their role as President. The poem’s conceit blurs the boundary between Myles the dyke-poet and Myles the Kennedy, allowing the assumption by a working-class lesbian of a genuine political authority, who tackles issues including AIDS, homelessness, healthcare, and funding for the arts – issues that the real President at the time the poem was written (Ronald Reagan) was refusing to address. Meanwhile the ‘real’ Myles, in their role as Kennedy imposter, must acknowledge the shortcomings of the heroic city that has also enabled them to escape a repressive home life to ‘be a poet’ and ‘become a lesbian’. In ‘our nation’s greatest city’, ‘the homeless are wandering / the streets’:

Homeless
men with AIDS are among
them. Is that right?
That there are no homes
for the homeless, that
there is no free medical
help for these men. *And women.*
That they get the message
– as they are dying –
that this is not their home?

⁵⁵ Maggie Nelson, *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007), p. 182.

⁵⁶ Myles, *Not Me*, pp. 13-17.

And how are your
teeth today? Can
you afford to fix them?
How high is your rent?

New York City is shown to be a place where people can't afford healthcare, can barely afford rent; it is also 'home of the business- / man and home of the / rich artist. People with / beautiful teeth who are not / on the streets'. 'What shall / we do about this dilemma?', Myles asks. It is here that New York redeems itself, revealing itself to be a place where 'the message of Western / Civilization' – that 'I am alone' – can be refuted:

Am I alone tonight?
I don't think so. Am I
the only one with bleeding gums
tonight. Am I the only
homosexual in this room
tonight. Am I the only
one whose friends have
died, are dying now.

[...]

I am no longer
ashamed, no longer
alone. I am not
alone tonight because
we are all Kennedys.

Myles identifies and asserts New York City as a communal space alive with radical social possibilities – a place in which the marginalised ‘are all Kennedys’. In the catalogue essay ‘Postcards from America: X Rays from Hell’, written in 1989 for the Artists Space exhibition *Witnesses: Against our Vanishing*, the artist and AIDS activist David Wojnarowicz wrote that

to make the private into something public is an action that has terrific repercussions [...] Each public disclosure of a private reality becomes something of a magnet that can attract others with a similar frame of reference; thus each public disclosure of a fragment of private reality serves as a dismantling tool against the illusion of ONE-TRIBE NATION.⁵⁷

‘An American Poem’ is just such a dismantling tool – in disclosing the intersections of private realities with public, political, historical, social, and psychological spaces, it brings the almost untouchable Kennedy legacy into intimate contact with the marginalised, the vulnerable, and with people who, like Lorde and Myles, use poetry as a tool for exactly this purpose.

‘Oh God, take care of this city. And take care / of me’,⁵⁸ Myles writes, in the last poem in *Not Me*, echoing Lorde’s plea that her son Jonno ‘Cherish this city / left you by default’. The relationship between poet and New York is complex, intricate, and key to understanding both Myles’s work and the city in which so many poets have lived and written. Maggie Nelson argues that Myles’s is a poetry ‘rooted in bodily presence’;⁵⁹ she might have added *in New York*. ‘I learned to be a poet in New York’, Myles has said: ‘as an aesthetic it means putting yourself in the middle of a place and being excited and stunned by it, and

⁵⁷ David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*, New York: Vintage, 1991, p.121.

⁵⁸ Myles, *Not Me*, ‘A Poem’, pp. 107-9

⁵⁹ Nelson, *Women, The New York School, and Other True Abstractions*, p. 171.

trying to make sense of it in your work'.⁶⁰ New York for Myles, as for Marianne Moore, means 'accessibility to experience'; as it is for Lorde, it is a means to articulate a poetics of resistance that is always a necessity, never a luxury.

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⁶⁰ Frances Richard, 'Never Real, Always True: An Interview with Eileen Myles', *Provincetown Arts* (2000), pp. 24-29.

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